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ABSTRACT

Ways to develop "creative automaticity" for writing in a foreign language are examined. The paper focuses on transactional writing (i.e., writing with the purpose of transferring precise information by such means as telex messages, business letters, memoranda, and short reports), and its main features of clarity and conventionality. It is noted that language fluency requires an ability to select appropriate utterances and then to master automatic utterance production. Once these skills are achieved, the foreign language student can apply mental creativity to other areas of the communicative process. An approach is described that creates a classroom audience for writing. Several skill building exercises are outlined, including the following: displaying text on a screen as a point of departure in a writing session; reading aloud; copying a well-written sample; identifying key elements of the sample; substitution exercises; student repetition of selected expressions in different contexts; parallel writing; and rewriting. Suggestions for text editing practice are also offered. Additional recommendations are given for text editing, dictation, using word processing, and correcting grammar. Contains 4 references. (LB)

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Creative Automaticity: The Writing of Business Spanish

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0.- Introduction

Teaching writing in a business Spanish class can be seen as the transmission of a set of formulae, but with room for each individual to influence the process[1]. Students can develop a "creative automaticity" that enables them to produce a "basic repertoire of commonly needed phrases with little effort" (Gatbonton and Segalowitz 1988).

Teaching writing in a business context is different from teaching writing skills in other settings because of the formulaic nature of the writing conventions. Because conventionality is the main feature that makes the task different from writing creatively, students master the formulae faster in comparison to any other type of writing. One formula (*Acuso recibo de su...*) can be used as a sentence frame or be combined with other utterances or formulae to make longer and more complex ones (*Acuso recibo de su ...+ solicitud/ carta/ lista de precios/ formulario/ factura/ notificación/* etc.)

On the other hand, the knowledge gained from research on technology can be incorporated in the teaching of writing. Thus I have decided to explore the effects of technological change on developing this so-called "creative automaticity" for writing in a foreign language (FL) business class.

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Many developments in language teaching have evolved from the awareness of different media with which we can work. We can benefit from the new technology in many ways, depending on the aims of the course; and in our case, a course in writing for business, the use of computer word processing contributes greatly to making the writing process not only simpler but more productive. Since one of the best ways to learn is to write a great deal, and even to write, revise, rewrite, and edit the same texts, the pedagogical benefit is maximized when the computer is used. In addition, the use of a transmissive overhead projector (or projection unit) that allows the entire group to work collectively on a single text facilitates the whole process. And finally, the use of computer in the FL business course helps the simulation of real situations in the modern business setting.

This paper will illustrate how the general principles of developing "automaticity", as described by Gatbonton and Segalowitz, can be applied in a business classroom setting. The scope of this paper, however, is restricted to transactional writing and leaves aside other forms of expressive and creative writing. Transactional writing, as defined by Britton (1977), is writing with the purpose of transferring precise information between reader and writer, such as télex messages, business letters, memoranda and short reports. The main features of this type of writing, as we know, are clarity and conventionality.

I.- Creative Automatization

Gatbonton and Segalowitz (1988) have labelled this process to develop oral proficiency *creative automaticity* since "students themselves generate (create) communicative intentions and produce the correspondingly appropiate utterances based on their understanding of the communicative situation" (476-77). Although these two researchers argue for the benefits of automatization, they "recognize that automatic performance does not constitute all that is involved in skilled performance" (476).

Gatbonton and Segalowitz point out that there are two skills a speaker must have to be fluent in a language: a) the selection of utterances (what to say, to whom and when); b) the mastery of utterance production (ability to produce utterances rapidly and smoothly), that is to say, automaticity (474). For second language learners automatizing certain aspects of performance is of as much relevance as it is for a pianist, for example, performing arpeggios on the piano. Thus, their mental resources may be applied more creatively elsewhere in the communicative process (475).

In my view their method of developing "automaticity" falls within the communicative approach framework, rather than being an example of traditional pattern drills, in that it provides students with extensive and consistent practice, as long as the exercises are focused and meaningful. In this process the creation of a real audience and/or reason for writing becomes essential. An audience not only creates a favorable climate in the classroom but also motivates students to write, making them

want to communicate their ideas. The writing of transactional pieces in the classroom is linked very neatly with the topics of the course (for example, under the topic of banking: letters requesting or denying credit/ inquiries about balance/complaints/ etc.) and therefore, with the pertinent vocabulary to use in such cases.

II.- Skill building exercises

I will describe some of the exercises that provide repetition and enable students to write easily and fluently. The prewriting activities, such as readings, discussion, role-playing and audiovisual work, take place before we go to the computer room, and the writing session begins.

1) Display of a text on the screen as the point of departure in a writing session: The projection format matches the computer monitor format so that there is an exact correspondence between the computer screen and the text projected. The displayed text serves as a model, but simply reading the sample does not meet the learner's needs. Only by interacting with the model--analyzing, dissecting the formulae, copying, repeating, modifying and generating a new one--does the device begin to make sense. The model presented serves as a stimulus for the learning process and as the semester progresses the students are exposed not only to models of good writing but also to models of poor writing.

2) Reading aloud the writing sample: This activity gives the instructor the occasion to correct faulty pronunciation.

3) Copy of a well-written sample: This step could easily be objected to as an outdated device; however, this imitation of

modeling has the following advantages: a) students gain direct exposure to the style they are expected to master; b) students learn the stylistic devices used in the business realm by utilizing them in the production of similar documents; and c) through repetition, these manipulated stylistic elements become "natural" to the students' own production.

4) Identification of the elements of the sample: Once the students have identified the various elements of a letter of a memo (introduction, body, closing) and the formulae or common expressions used in each instance, I encourage them to consider other vocabulary choices until they become aware of shades of meaning before beginning the practice of substitution. Generally, this is the time for multiple choice synonym exercises.

5) Substitution exercises and transformation of the model: Certain verbs, adjectives, adverbs or sentences are underlined and the students are asked to find other alternatives. Then changes are made and saved as a new document. This practice gives them versatility in changing words or sentences while still expressing the original meaning. In this way, they learn the art of specificity and correctness required in transactional writing.

6) Student repetition of selected expressions in different contexts using the model: For example: they may repeat a given text in a series of memos that utilize different sets of formulaic expressions. The recipients of the memos will then actually be in the classroom, also acting a role. The first memo (a) brings a problem to the attention of the first appropriate

person, who (b) in turn notifies someone of a higher rank, who (c) advises calling an expert in that type of problem, who (d) finds a solution and reports back to the company[2]. An effective variation is to originate the chain of memos with one to each student announcing his/her promotion within the company. Each student responds to the memo and, in addition, sends memos to the personnel office and the person in charge of office space and equipment, to make the arrangements required as a result of the promotion (i.e. new salary, office equipment, new office, etc.).

7) Parallel writing: Instead of making changes in the sample, students create their own letter or memo with a new set of instructions but parallel to the one they have just worked on[3].

After the completion of the steps described above, the students have on the diskette the first draft of the assignments which they, then, revise outside of class. I collect the printout during the following session, indicate where specific revisions are needed, and return it to them with comments and suggestions.

8) Rewriting: Students rewrite the assignments making a few specified changes, usually of a grammatical or a organizational nature. They might, for example, rewrite a letter changing only the verbal command forms, or they might rewrite it because there was not consistency in the use of the subject (ruego, esperamos, etc.). They make the suggested changes (connecting words, vocabulary items, passive for an active voice, punctuation,

spelling, etc.) and sometimes they decide to reorganize their ideas in order to change the emphasis of the document.

An objection that might arise is that if they are repeating all the time we do not know how much students learn. The answer to this objection is that testing will tell us how and if the learning process is taking place. Periodically the students have to produce letters, memos or messages that allow evaluation of the learning process.

III.- Text editing practice

Given the characteristics of transactional writing (clarity and conventionality), peer editing plays a very important role in this process. It may take one of the following forms:

1) In small groups, students discuss the writing piece and receive comments on the comprehensibility of their writing before they produce the final copy. The instructor visits the groups and offers quick reference service. Since all students are working on the same topic (letters to the bank, promotion of a product, etc.) vocabulary and content are familiar to all.

2) In the large group all edit a piece of writing that is projected onto the screen. The same activities take place during the session with the same results as in the small group; this varies the routine, resulting in an increase of interest. During the editing session the class reads and discusses one of the students' writing assignments not only correcting grammar errors but improving style and organization. The group work improves the quality of the product by changing words, identifying words used to avoid repetition (synonyms), reordering sentences,

suggesting additions. (At times, if the sample is good the group may even praise the author). It helps students to write clear, direct statements that come to the point and say exactly what is meant; and they also become aware that writing is, in part, a process of interaction between the reader and writer and that good writing is never accomplished in a single draft. It is in this editing process where a verbose, heavy-handed or indirect style is detected and corrected.

Peer group editing provides an excellent format for the initial revisions in a non-threatening situation and yields great profits. As a result, students become more sensitive to nuances in choice of words and syntactic structures as well as to the needs of their audience if they are to communicate the purpose effectively. If the readers do not understand something in the writing piece they go back to the writer who then sees the purpose of editing the text. As a general rule we edit a) for economy and b) for a forceful style (Flower 1985: 191-98).

IV.- Dictation

A variation of the practice of copying the text is dictation of the sample, which serves also as a listening comprehension (LC) exercise. Dictation, however, like any other LC exercise, needs a framework, a context. Even the simplest text may be hard to understand if there is no context for making sense out of it. Dictation can be done by having the students type either a text being read by the instructor or a text recorded on a dictaphone. The latter option requires the preparation of the tape in advance with the text the student will transcribe and subsequently print,

and submit for revision. Furthermore, since the effective use of this system requires training in using the dictaphone, students also practice dictation of a message which they must plan out before beginning to speak into the microphone.

V.- Using Word Processing

Although word processing has certainly become an essential component of secondary education, it has not yet become the routine means by which high school students write compositions. Therefore, students must be taught how to use this resource.

The computer instruction on the program selected for use takes place at the very beginning of the course. The first assignment aims at familiarizing the student with the chosen program for word processing. The use of the same software by everybody simplifies the interaction and coordination of activities.

If computer-based writing activities are to improve the productivity of our courses, these activities will have to take into account the complexities of instructing a heterogeneous mixture of students in large groups. This means that a limited enrollment figure must be maintained. I think that twenty is the maximum number of students who can benefit from this technique, with fifteen being the ideal class size.

VI.- Correction of grammar

Traditionally the correction of grammar took all of our effort as writing teachers, thereby ignoring other important aspects of the total process. By removing grammar errors as a focus, students begin to see other important aspects of their

writing in a different perspective and become aware that good writing goes beyond grammatical correctness.

The correction of grammar with word processing is not only made simpler, but given a different degree of importance. Word processing allows students to concentrate on one or two problems at a time (format, vocabulary choices, etc) rather than having to tackle all the problems simultaneously. If necessary, I do a quick review of a grammar point, but grammar is corrected mainly on an individual basis during the visits to the computer station of each of the students. Although correction of grammar continues during the revision and grading of final products, I try to not only individualize this part of the class but also to minimize it. It is my role to evaluate as a reader and to read and respond to students writing at different stages of the writing process not just after the final version has been handed in. In this way, I can select which problems to tackle at each stage.

VII.- Conclusion

Altough this approach has proven effective in the classroom, being able to write a business letter does not imply, by itself, that the student posseses the linguistic competence that is the final goal of language teaching. Nevertheless, being able to write transactional pieces using the accepted formulae with ease enables the student to engage in other types of writing more fluently and his/her motivation improves tremendously.

My position is that through the constant practice of writing, revising, editing, and re-writing, as well as the

concentration on the elements of business style, students' language proficiency improves, as do the other skills needed in the effective conducting of business in the target language.

Writing in a FL business class not only integrates all learning activities but also is a very powerful tool for achieving the goals of the course.

Notes

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2. This technique, presented as an exercise to achieve oral fluency, was adapted from Gatbonton et al (1988).

3. See Ann Raimes (1983), p.110-11.

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